DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 782 FL 021 009

AUTHOR Hashemi, Mohammad Reza
TITLE Analysis of Academic Discourse: Insights for Teaching Grammar.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 8p.: Paper presented at the Conference on FLTI (1st, Tabriz-Baku, Iran, 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Comparative Analysis; Cost Effectiveness; Discourse Analysis; Educational Strategies; Engineering Education; *English (Second Language); *English for Academic Purposes; *Grammar; Higher Education; Medical Education; *Relevance (Education); Second Language Instruction; *Second Languages; Social Sciences; *Textbooks

ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that second language instruction at the college level should focus on the elements of academic discourse and not spend unnecessary time on less relevant grammatical structures, an analysis of discourse structures in subject-area textbooks was undertaken. Grammatical structures characteristic of academic discourse were analyzed for frequency in English-language texts in the social sciences, medicine, engineering, and two general topics. Those structures were then compared for frequency in the combined field-specific discourses and in general discourse. It is concluded that college-level second language grammar instruction should be geared toward the structures most commonly used in academic discourse. In English, these appear to be simple present, passives, past and present participles, relative clauses, noun compounds, and certain conditionals. Comparison of these results and the curriculum of remedial English in Iran's colleges also indicates that over 70% of the structures studied are little if ever used in academic, field-specific texts, suggesting substantial waste of instructional resources. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M.R. Hashemi

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED354782

Analysis of academic discourse: Insights for teaching grammar

1st Tabriz-Baku Conference on FLTI

Mohammad Reza Hashemi

Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

A glance at the history of language teaching reveals that teaching grammar has been a controversial issue. Various methods have been proposed and, accordingly, various books have been written for teaching grammar. However, experience shows that L2 grammar cannot be successfully taught neither in vacuum nor on the basis of a specific grammar book. Teaching grammar in vacuum is but closing one's eyes to the reality. Teaching L2 grammar needs an awarenes of some of the factors involved in the teaching situation. These are (a) the students' aim of learning the language, (b) the objectives of the course, and (c) the textual analysis of the discourse that the learners will ultimately deal with in their career. Teaching grammatical features of academic discourse is not an exception. What I am suggesting is that teaching grammar to college students should rest on close observation and analysis of these factors.

Regarding the first factor, it is to be noted that, in general, most foreign language learners at college level learn a given foreign language not to communicate with their classmates or teachers but to decipher a text to get some information about their academic field of specialization. As for the objective of language courses, due to the needs of learners specified above, the objective seems to demand a situation in which the learners are provided with some specialized information through a different language. Concerning the last factor, a textual analysis should be carried out in terms of grammatical structuring of the discourse that learners are expected to deal with.

I am of the belief that teaching grammar should be in line with the grammatical structuring of academic texts. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze such texts so that basic grammatical features of different academic registers are identified. A corollary of such an analysis is that teachers and students would not waste their time, energy,wealth and health,

FL 021009

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

and concentrate only on the basic features.

A classification of categories of discourse begins the discussion. Two general categaries of discourse can be identified: general language discourse (GLD) and field-specific discourse (FSD). As the labels indicate, the distinctive feature in this classification is the " content " of the material rendered through each discourse. But since " form " and " content " , or to put it in linguistic terms, " code" and " meaning", affect each other, the intended meaning in GLD and FSD affects the texture of the linguistic feauters of each discourse. Applied linguists maintain that analysis of linguistic features, whether lexical or syntactic, of GLD and FSD, manifests major differences. Yet, some scholars believe that this is not the case. Corbluth, as Hitchcock (1978) mentions, is an opponent of the dichotomy and maintains that there are no appreciable structural differences between special English and general English (P.45). But close observation of GLD and FSD reveals that such a dichotomy does exist, and that there are major structural and lexical differences between the two. This article deals only with the structural differences of GLD and FSD and their pedagogical implications.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Basis and critique

In the 50's and 60's, Structuralism influenced all language-related disciplines. It started with phonological analysis of language but did not stop there. Efforts were made to " atomize", to quote Allen and widdowson (1978), other subsystems of language. Structural analysis of general and specialized texts and materials was the result of this kind of endeavor. In general, structural analysis of language items was carried out through frequency counts of the most recurrent syntactic elements. The underlying rationale was that the most frequent elements were important, and therefore needed, in the given discourse. The pedagogical implication is that the elements should be incorporated into class materials and texts of the students studying that given discourse. For instance, in case of English, text analysis has proved that frequency of some relative clauses, nominal compounds, complementizers, passives and post-modification through complete or reduced relative clauses and participles is much higher in ESP than in general English. Pros and cons of the dichotomy usually mention findings in support of their ideas (For details of what cons believe, see: Allen and widdowson, 1978; Cheong, 1979; Hitchcock, 1978). I am of the opinion that the dichotomy, if critically studied, is valid and yields pedagogical implications. The following study substantiates this standpoint.

Scope and method of study

The study is based on frequency analysis of grammatical structures of academic texts of different fields of specialization. The rationale behind the analysis is that basic

structures of such texts are specified to the effect that students do not spend their time and effort in futile, studying exceptions or structures which are of little relevance to their academic texts.

The texts on the results of which the analysis rests were selected at random from different field-specific texts on engineering, medicine, social sciences, and two general texts which dealt with different topics. They were all in English.

Two or there complete units of each book were randomly chosen. All the structures were analyzed, counted and registered. Then common structures such as " adjective + noun " or " article + (adjective) + noun " which were not characteristic of any discourse were set aside.

Results

The results are shown in Tables I and II.

Fields / Grammatical structures	Social Sciences	Medicine	Engineering	General English
Simple present	65%	84%	65%	61%
Simple past	17%	1.5%	6%	9%
Present progressive	0	0	1.5%	0
Present perfect	8.5%	1.5%	3%	12%
Past perfect	0	0	1%	3%
Future	0	0	10%	0
Participles (past and present)	5%	34%	47.5%	4.5%
Passives	17%	65.5%	63%	17%
Relative clauses	7%	18%	18%	20.5%
Reduced rel cl	2.5%	27%	4.5%	3.5%
Modals	8.5%	13%	23.5%	16%
Noun compounds	0	25%	27%	1%
Conditional type I	2.5%	7%	2%	1%
Direct-Indirect speech	0	0	0	7%

Table I: Percentage of frequency of grammatical structures in some field-specific and general passages

The first important and noticeable point is that some grammatical structures have not been used in the passages at all. This becomes more significant if it is considered that

the total percentage is the result of analyzing more than 330 sentences. It implies that the points are not needed and therefore merit no consideration. Secondly, on the average, relative clauses, whether complete or reduced, comprise more than 25% of the whole sentences of the passages. Due to their importance and significance, relative clauses should be taught and practiced more. Thirdly, the most frequent tenses are the simple present, simple past and present perfect. Other tenses, so it can be implied, need not be worked on; rather, time and effort should be spent on the tenses which are of immediate use. And finally, passive sentences of the frequent tenses and participles in post-modification are also to be worked on.

Let's look at the data from another perspective, and compare the overall percentage of frequency of grammatical structures in the ESP passages with that of general English. The comparison is shown in Table II below.

Kind of discourse / Grammatical structures	FSD	GD
Simple present	74%	61%
Simple past	5%	9%
Present perfect	3%	12%
Passives	56%	17%
Participles (past & persent)	35%	4.5%
Relative clauses (complete & reduced)	29%	24%
Modals	16%	16%
Noun compounds	22%	1%
Conditional type I	7.5%	1%
Direct-Indirect speech	0	1.5%
Compound-Complex sentences	5%	80%

Table II: Comparative frequency of grammatical structures in FSD & GD

A glance at the Table shows how teaching grammar should be geared towards the students' needs and the texture of their course books. Put it another way, teachers who teach both ESP and general English courses need not teach the same grammatical items in the two courses. Even if they teach the same grammatical items, the emphasis laid on them should vary according to the frequency and importance of the items. While present perfect and past perfect have high frequency in general English discourse, they are not so ferquent in FSD; hence, they merit little consideration. Another example, direct-indirect speech and compound-complex sentences are high in frequency in GD but not in FSD. Use

of noun compounds is another example. They are rather ferquent in ESP textbooks, especially in EST materials. So, the students must be acquainted with the structure in detail.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Some implications can be drawn from the study. Firstly, analysis of frequency of grammatical structures of the texts sheds light on what teaching procedures text designers and teachers of English should follow. They should, in the first place, know their students and their needs in terms of the structures that they should learn and master. Tables I and II show what structures are needed most in FSD and GD because of their high frequency in each field of study. Any effort spent on teaching items of lower frequency is futile. Such items of rare or no use do not appear in students' course books and materials and, consequently, are memorized for verbatim use and forgotten in the long run. Examples of such items are direct-indirect speech, conditional sentences types II and III, tag questions in different tenses, and some tenses like past perfect and continuous tenses, to name a few.

The second point of significance for teachers of English grammar and text designers is to exemplify the grammatical point in question through using sentences from the student's field of specialization and knowledge. There is a psychological rationale behind this practice. The students get the new information—a given grammatical point—faster and more willingly when the examples signifying the point are content-wise known to them. Let's consider the concept of pre-modification of a noun with another noun, what is called noun adjunct or noun compound in grammar books. A good number of examples can be drawn from field-specific discourse to clarify the point. Another example is post-modification through complete or reduced relative clauses. As Table II shows, post-modification is very recurrent in ESP texts and therefore merits consideration.

The third implication is that if the needed grammatical structures are practiced only, much time, effort, and money is saved. Analysis of the list of structures that college students in Iran should study in Remedial English reveals the grim fact that more than 70% of the structures and grammatical points learned or, to put it more exactly, memorized are rarely if ever used in their ESP texts. Besides, it is very unfortunate to find that the way the structures are manipulated is a combination of grammar-translation and audiolingual methods. Hence, it can be concluded that the linguistic content of the course is not planned according to what Wilkins (1976) calls it " the semantic demands of the learner" (p.19). The specialized English language learners need not learn through habit formation and parroting because they will not find themselves in situations where they should express themselves orally. Moreover, the structures practiced and learned are not found in their textbooks. Therefore, if the students' time and effort, and sometimes money, is not wasted and only the structures needed for reading academic texts are studied, the extra time and effort can be invested on improving the students' reading skills in terms of communicative analysis of the language in question, in this case English. This can lead to the removal of a shortcoming associated with the structural approach to language.

A criticism usually leveled against any structural approach to language is that it views language in isolation. As Allan and Widdowson (1978) put it, any structural approach " atomizes" discourse into isolated linguistic elements which are quantitatively analyzed and registered as a manifestation of the language system (P.39). To avoid this pitfall and help students get acquainted with the " signification " and " value " , to quote Allan and Widdowson(1978,P.62), of linguistic elements, linguistic signification of the elements can be analyzed in conjunction with the communicative value which such items take on within the context of a field-specific discourse. For instance, the value of some linguistic items is to make generalizations, while some others are used for making illustrations or exemplifications. Extra time of the students, therefore, can be spent on teaching the linguistic characteristics of field-specific functions such as classification, definition, generalization, in so far as the structures studied occur in such functions. For instance, the grammatical concept of " relative clause ", whether complete or reduced, is a device for post-modification. It is high in frequency in academic discourse (see Table II). This grammatical device, as an example of " signification " of a linguistic element, can be analyzed in terms of its linguistic structure; then its " value" in making " definitions " can be worked on and exemplified: " Carbonic acid is a compound which consists of water and carbon dioxide". The students can then work on some pairs of related sentences using them in making definitions with a " which " clause. Other grammatical structures can also be analyzed in terms of their communicative value for expressing functions of language such as explanation, description, comparison and contrast, narration and the like.

This kind of practice helps EFL learners become familiar with the structure(s) needed for writing sentences containing such functions in their own field of specialization. This is especially useful for graduate students who study English for specific purposes. Since they conduct research in their fields, they may need to express the results of their research in English to those interested in the subject. This can be accomplished better through using sentences containing universal linguistic features of academic discourse.

CONCLUSION

Teaching and learning grammar in vacuum is doomed to failure from the start. This is true with teaching grammar in vocational courses as well. The factors that determine selection of grammatical items and teaching them in such courses should be taken into account. They are the students' aim of learning the language, the objectives of the courses and the textual analysis of academic discourse used in course books. The results of the analysis reported in this article reveal that emphasis should be laid on teaching the most highly frequent structures. Work on the " signification " and " value " , or " usage " and " use ", of such structures as used in academic discourse helps foreign-language students of vocational courses get acquainted with the language not only as a set of grammar rules but also as a means for making statements of different kinds: generalization, description, exemplification and so on.

Sources:

Allen,J.P. & Widdowson, H.G., Teaching the communicative use of English. In R.Mackey & A.Mountford (Eds.),1978.

Bhasher,W.,& Prabhu,N.S. *English through reading*.London &Basingtoke: Macmillan Education, 1975.

Bidahri, P.,Fallahi, M., & Maftoon,P. *English for the students of Engineering*. Tehran: SAMT, 1988.

Blass, L., & Durichello, J. *From concept to composition: Reading and writing for ESL students*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1985.

Brasnett,C, *English for engineers*. London: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Cheong,L.K. Trends in the linguistic study of English for science and technology. In J.C. Richards (Ed),1976.

Deedari,R., Zia Hossaini, M.,& Varzegar, M. *English for the students of medicine*. Tehran: SAMT, 1989.

Hitchcock, J. Reading and scientific English: Prospects, problems, and programs in Iran. In M.T. Trimble et al (Eds.), 1978.

Mackey, R. & Mountford, A. (Eds.). *English for specific purposes: A case study approach*. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1978.

Richards J. C. (Ed.). *Teaching English for science and technology*. ————————: Singapore University Press Ltd., 1976.

Trimble, M.T. , Trimble, L., & Drobinick, K. (Eds.). *English for special purposes: Science and technology*. ————————: Oregan state University, 1978.

Wilkins, D. *Notional syllabuses*. London: Oxford University Press, 1976.